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Administration to Press Congress For New Aid to Nicaraguan Rebels

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WASHINGTON, Jan. 4 — The Reagan Administration plans to issue a white paper describing an arms buildup in Nicaragua in an extensive new campaign to persuade Congress to renew aid to Nicaraguan rebels, senior Administration officials said today.

Despite repeated votes in recent years by the House against aiding the rebels, the Administration believes it has a chance of gaining approval for such aid in March or April because of growing opposition in Congress to the Nicaraguan Government and its ties to Cuba, and the Soviet Union.

Details Are Not Final

Although detailed plans for the lobbying effort are not final, the officials said, it will include publication later this month of a report on a military buildup in Nicaragua and efforts by Government officials to focus public and Congressional attention on Soviet arms shipments to Nicaragua.

United States aid to the rebels, which was funneled through the Central Intelligence Agency starting in 1981, ran out in September. Since then the rebels have financed their operations with pri-

ivate donations and with money and arms provided by governments, including Israel's, according to rebel leaders and Administration officials.

In October, Congress approved \$14 million in aid for the rebels in the current fiscal year but stipulated that none of the money could be spent unless it renewed approval after February.

'The Climate Is Better'

"We think the climate is better now than it was the last time Congress considered the issue," a senior State Department official said.

President Reagan, in an interview published in late December by Human Events, a conservative weekly, said the Administration would "do our best" to gain approval for renewed aid.

Mr. Reagan, according to Human Events, added, "I think the Congress — or that portion of it that's been blocking us — has been very irresponsible."

There have been signs of potential movement on the issue in Congress. For example, Representative Bill Richardson, a New Mexico Democrat

and a member of the Hispanic caucus, said during a visit to Nicaragua last month that he might reconsider his opposition to aid for the rebels.

In an interview Thursday, Mr. Richardson said he was "very disillusioned" with the domestic policies of the Nicaraguan Government and found that President-elect Daniel Ortega Saavedra "reminded me of a little Castro." He said he still planned to vote against aid but might be swayed by developments in Nicaragua.

Administration officials say they hope to bring the issue up for a vote in March or April and to capitalize on a perception among many members of Congress that Nicaragua has reduced civil liberties since the presidential election there in November.

'A Bipartisan Consensus'

Senator Patrick J. Leahy, a Vermont Democrat who became vice chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence this week, said in an interview today: "There is a bipartisan consensus in Congress against Sandinista efforts to censor the press and to build ties to Cuba. The Sandinistas make a bad mistake if they think that opposition to covert aid to the rebels implies some kind of support for the Sandinistas themselves."

Mr. Leahy, however, said he doubted whether the Administration could muster enough votes to gain the second approval required for expenditure of the \$14 million allocated in October.

"Pressuring the Sandinistas with a covert intelligence operation is not the way to go," Mr. Leahy said.

Mr. Leahy and Mr. Richardson said that reports of atrocities committed by the rebels would likely make it harder to gain approval for renewed aid.

Investigations of Mammal

Reported abuses by the rebels, including accounts about groups of civilians who were burned, dismembered, blinded or beheaded, came to the attention of Congress recently as a result of investigations into a C.I.A. manual on guerrilla warfare.

Present and former rebel leaders said in interviews last month that some of their guerrillas had been guilty of atrocities. The leaders said they deplored the acts and contended that Government forces were guilty of the same kinds of abuses.

Using the rebels to put pressure on the Government has been a key element of United States policy in Central America since 1981, and the Administration is reluctant to abandon the pro-

gram, in part because of a lack of alternatives acceptable to policy-makers.

Administration officials said they would attempt to persuade Congress that the best way to encourage a modification of Nicaragua's domestic and foreign policies is to maintain the rebel military pressure.

Periodic Reports

The Administration has issued periodic reports describing a buildup of Soviet and Cuba arms in Nicaragua. The new report, State Department officials said, would bring all the information together in one document and emphasize the recent delivery of Soviet weapons to Nicaragua, including attack helicopters, surface-to-air missiles and high-speed patrol boats.

Although Administration spokesmen have described these weapons as offensive in nature, some United States military officers have said they are primarily defensive.

The officials said that in the weeks ahead, the State Department, the Defense Department and the White House would try to focus attention on these arms deliveries and on Nicaraguan efforts to restrict press freedom and travel abroad by opponents of the Government.

They said the Administration would also cite efforts by Nicaraguan civilians to resist military conscription.